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Going Dutch in the Mekong Delta: a framing perspective on water policy translation

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ABSTRACT

In response to the rising climatic impacts on worldwide urbanized deltas, the Netherlands has strategically and politically framed Dutch water management as a global water solution for improving water safety and flood protection in other countries such as Vietnam. Being renowned for its water management approach, the Netherlands is particularly active in sharing water knowledge, insights, and policies internationally. This paper connects a framing perspective to policy translation studies to understand the role of language and meaning-making in the cross-border travel of policies. Adopting a framing perspective, it presents four dimensions of water policy translation concerning how policy frames are being created and interpreted – during the cross-border travel. The paper follows the process of the Dutch water management approach being 'packaged' as global water solutions and 'translated' to inform the development of the Vietnamese Mekong Delta Plan of 2013. The results show that although similar concepts, metaphors and narratives could be witnessed in this translation process, the local use and interpretation of these concepts remain challenging. Inclusive engagement, shared and comprehensive understanding, and continuous exchange and learning processes could help to improve cross-border policy-making for sustainable delta management.

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Policy translation; policy framing; water management; Dutch water management; Mekong Delta Plan

1. Introduction

Intensifying climate risks on water-related impacts have stimulated the global exchange of and learning about water management and climate change adaptation. Several authors (e.g. Johnson & Blackburn, 2014; Paulsson, 2018) have observed an increasing number of global policy platforms, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the OECD Water Governance Initiative, the Global Water Partnership, the 100 Resilient Cities Programme and the Delta Coalition. These policy platforms stimulate international learning and collaboration and aim to provide policy inspiration across borders (see also Mukhtarov & Daniell, 2017; Spaans & Waterhout, 2017). The Netherlands is particularly active in sharing water knowledge, insights, and policies internationally (Vinke-De Kruijf et al., 2012; Zevenbergen et al., 2012; MIE, 2016; Minkman & van Buuren, 2019; NWP, 2014b). According to the OECD (2014), Dutch water management is regarded as an international reference for dealing with water and climate challenges effectively and innovatively. In this context, the international cooperation on the Mekong Delta Plan in Vietnam and the Bangladesh Delta Plan are considered prime examples of the promotion and uptake of the Dutch water management approach in developing countries (Hasan et al., 2019; Weger, 2019; Zevenbergen et al., 2012).

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Recent research has proposed that the cross-border travel of policies can be critically explored through the concept of 'policy translation' (Hasan et al., 2019; Minkman & van Buuren, 2019; Weger, 2019). While earlier literature conceptualized the movement and influence of policies and ideas as policy transfer, policy diffusion or lesson-drawing (Evan & Davies, 1999; Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996; Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Marsh & Sharman, 2009; Rose, 1991; Vinke-de Kruijf, 2013), viewing the travel of policies as a rather linear process, the proponents of the policy translation approach consider the travel of policies as a dynamic and interpretative process. Lendvai and Stubbs (2007), for instance, highlight the multiple interpretations and changes of policy ideas from its creation in one country to its adoption and being put into practice in other countries. In addition, policy translation draws attention to the strategic and dynamic interactions between different contexts and actors, to the active roles of policy actors, and to the ways in which these actors engage in and influence the process of policy translation (Lendvai & Stubbs, 2007, 2009; McCann & Ward, 2012; Mukhtarov, 2014; Peck, 2011; Stone, 2012; Stone, 2017). Using the concept of 'translation' instead of 'transfer' emphasizes the explicit focus on the role of language and the negotiation and transformation of meaning in the cross-border travel of policies. Although understanding this interpretative process is generally considered to be at the heart of policy translation research, so far, little attention has been given to the application of an interpretive approach to analyse language use and the construction of shared meaning in empirical cases (McCann, 2003; McCann, 2008; Mukhtarov, 2014; Peck, 2011; Stone, 2012; Stone, 2017).

This paper aims to fill this research gap by connecting a framing perspective to policy translation. Framing fundamentally involves selecting and highlighting some aspects of perceived reality, to promote particular problem definitions and solutions (Entman, 1993). Adopting a framing perspective on policy translation enables researchers to uncover *how* policy actors make sense of policy problems and ambiguous realities, and strategically choose to present particular policy solutions for addressing problems in their own countries and beyond (cf. Rein, 1983; Lendvai & Stubbs, 2009; van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). The choice to adopt a framing perspective builds on previous policy translation studies, in which the terms 'framing' and 'reframing' are used in general to refer to, for example, the communication of knowledge via narratives or the modification of the meaning of policy-ideas that travel (see e.g. Mukhtarov, 2014; Lendvai & Stubbs, 2009; Stone, 2012; Weger, 2019; Weisser et al., 2014). Nevertheless, there are very limited empirical studies that connect policy translation to framing and that follow a policy in its cross-border travels to unravel the associated meaning-making in different (local) contexts. An understanding of language use in meaning-making and strategic framing processes in the context of overall cross-border policy-making is still needed. In this paper we, therefore, combine insights from policy translation (e.g. Beveridge & Guy, 2009; De Jong & Edelenbos, 2007; Freeman, 2009; Lendvai & Stubbs, 2007; Mukhtarov, 2014) with policy framing literature (e.g. Rein, 1983; Rein & Laws, 2000; Schön, 1993; Schön & Rein, 1994; van Hulst & Yanow, 2016), to develop a conceptual framework for analyzing the framing process involved in the creation and mobilization of international policy ideas and solutions for creating local-specific solutions and embedding these in local water planning practice.

The development of the Mekong Delta Plan 2013 (MDP from hereon) provides an excellent case for exploring policy translation in practice, as it shows how the Dutch water management approach was strategically 'packaged' as a global water solution and subsequently 'translated' to inform the Vietnamese Mekong Delta Plan 2013 (see e.g. Hasan et al., 2019; Minkman & van Buuren, 2019; Seijger et al., 2019; Van Staveren et al., 2018; Vo et al., 2019; Weger, 2019; Zegwaard et al., 2019). Previous research has provided insights into the branding of the Dutch Delta Approach (Minkman & van Buuren, 2019), the translation of Dutch water management knowledge to influence climate change adaptation in the Mekong delta (Weger, 2019), the strategic efforts of Dutch and Vietnamese policy actors and their interactions in the Mekong delta (Hasan et al., 2019), and the political agenda-setting by Vietnamese policy entrepreneurs for strategic delta planning (Vo et al., 2019). In line with Weger (2019), this paper addresses both 'sides' of cross-border policy interaction, and thus includes the perspectives of both the Netherlands and Vietnam. Unlike these recent studies exploring the internationalization of the Dutch water management and the making of the MDP, this paper uses this travel of water policy ideas from the Netherlands as a case to connect the framing perspective to policy translation. This paper adopts the framing perspective as an analytical approach for exploring the negotiation and construction of shared meaning (i.e. strategic policy frames) in cross-border policy-making.

This approach helps to analyse how meanings are created and negotiated across borders, and how the key concepts and metaphors that are part of the renowned Dutch water management approach, are interpreted in local practice.

Following the introduction, Section 2 develops a conceptual framework for studying water policy translation from a framing perspective. In Section 3, the data collection and analytical strategies for the framing analysis are explained. Section 4 analyses how the Netherlands strategically framed the Dutch water management approach as 'global water solutions' and subsequently developed the Dutch delta management frame. Next, this paper addresses the development of the local context-specific frame and its embeddedness in Vietnamese water planning practices in Section 5. The discussion reflects the framing processes that have taken place, and how the key concepts of the Mekong delta management frame were interpreted in local practice. This paper ends with conclusions and suggestions for future research.

2. Water policy translation: a framing perspective

Several researchers have adopted policy translation to study how water policy ideas and solutions travel across borders (Beveridge & Guy, 2009; Hasan et al., 2019; Minkman & van Buuren, 2019; Mukhtarov & Daniell, 2017; Mukhtarov & Gerlak, 2013). Policy translation offers an analytical focus on the open-ended, strategic and dynamic process of the cross-border travel of policy ideas. First, the policy translation approach highlights the divergence, mutation and hybridization of policy ideas as they move across borders (Lendvai & Stubbs, 2007; Stone, 2017). Second, policy translation draws attention to the so-called 'bricolage'; the strategic and dynamic interaction among stakeholders in communicating and exchanging policy ideas and solutions (McCann & Ward, 2012; Stone, 2012). Third, policy translation literature argues that policy actors involved in cross-border policy making should not be conceptualized as passive and rational agents, but rather as active policy 'brokers', strategically adjusting, selecting and adapting transnational norms and ideas in their national institutional context (Clarke, 2005; McCann & Ward, 2012; Stone, 2004; 2012).

The framing perspective is well-equipped to illuminate these complex, dynamic and political characteristics of policy translation in practice. The origins of the framing concept lie in the fields of cognitive psychology (Bartlett, 1932) and anthropology (Bateson, 1972). Its more recent social-constructivist use can be traced back in particular to Goffman (1974), who argued that individuals perceive events in terms of certain 'frameworks of understanding' or 'frames', which provide them with a way of describing and interpreting the event to which it is applied. The interpretive and social constructivist framing perspective has been adopted by scholars in a broad range of disciplines, including public policy studies (e.g. Schön & Rein, 1994; van Hulst & Yanow, 2016), social movement research (e.g. Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 2014) and communication research (e.g. Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010). A commonality between these approaches is that a 'frame' can be considered a 'sense-making device' (Weick, 1995). A framing perspective emphasizes the different ways in which people make sense of reality and how they add meaning to a previously ambiguous or complex situation (Van den Brink, 2009). Like previous water and environmental policy studies that have analysed framing processes (e.g. McEvoy et al., 2013; Restemeyer et al., 2018 Vink et al., 2013;), this paper uses policy framing for analyzing how policy actors make sense of complex water challenges in order to define problems and promote particular solutions across borders.

Policy framing draws attention to the relevance and strategic use of language as the means to define policy problems and formulate potential solutions (Van den Brink, 2009). The policy frame concept draws on the metaphor of perspective; the perspective through which policy agents see reality and act on it (Rein, 1983). Accordingly, a policy frame is understood as 'a normative-prescriptive story that sets out a problematic situation and a course of action to be taken to address the problematic situation' (Rein & Laws, 2000, p. 93). These normative-prescriptive stories are created through a complementary process of 'naming' and 'framing', in which 'things are selected for attention and named in such a way as to fit the frame constructed for the situation' (Schön & Rein, 1995: 26). The naming and framing of a problem often proceed via the use of metaphors (Schön, 1993). Policy framing also entails 'narrating', that is, binding all salient elements (the named and

framed concepts and metaphors) together in a coherent story (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). The resulting policy frames function as guides for doing and acting.

From a policy translation perspective, a key question is how policy meanings are negotiated, transformed and mobilized – that is, how policy frames are being created and interpreted – during cross-border travel. Connecting insights from policy translation (Clarke, 2005; Lendvai & Stubbs, 2007; McCann & Ward, 2012; Mukhtarov, 2014; Stone, 2012, 2017) to insights from policy framing (Rein, 1983; Rein & Laws, 2000; Schön & Rein, 1995; van Hulst & Yanow, 2016) enables an in-depth analysis of (1) the creation of an international water policy frame; (2) the mobilization of this water policy frame for international use; (3) the creation of a local context-specific water policy frame based on this international frame; and (4) the process of embedding this local context-specific water policy frame in local water planning practice. Table 1 summarizes these four dimensions of water policy translation. It is important to note that while these four dimensions are discussed in a certain order, we consider them as iterative and interconnected, thereby acknowledging the messy and complex process of the travel of policy ideas (Peck, 2011).

2.1 Creating an international water policy frame

The policy translation literature (Beveridge & Guy, 2009; Hasan et al., 2019; Lendvai & Stubbs, 2009; McCann, 2003; Minkman & van Buuren, 2019) highlights the role of policy actors and experts in shaping policy ideas and concepts originating in their own countries and promoting these as relevant international policy solutions. Based on this, it can be argued that from a policy framing perspective the first dimension in water policy translation concerns the creation of an international water policy frame. The first key activity relating to this dimension is aimed at making sense of global water policy problems (the development of a problem perception). For instance, recurring water challenges such as water shortage, flood damage and water pollution are often framed as global water challenges by international development organizations (Molle & Hoanh, 2011). The creation of an international water policy frame thus involves policy actors defining global water policy problems (Prince, 2010; Stone, 2012; i). Based on this sense-making, the second key activity is the development of a global water policy or the repackaging of local water solutions to address the identified global water policy problems (the development of a course of action). *Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM)* is an example of such an international water policy solution, promoted as relevant for improving the water sector in various countries (Mukhtarov & Daniell, 2017).

2.2 Mobilizing the water policy frame for international use

The second dimension in water policy translation concerns the mobilization of the created water policy frame for international use. Based on policy translation literature, two related key activities can again be identified.

Table 1. Dimensions of water policy translation.

Dimensions of translation	Activities
Creating an international water policy frame	- Defining global water policy problems - Developing internationally relevant water policy solutions
Mobilizing the international water policy frame	- Presenting and communicating the developed international water policy frame on global policy platforms - Engaging and negotiating with partner countries on the use of the international water policy frame
Creating a local context-specific water policy frame	- Defining water policy problems in the local context - Developing local-specific water solutions
Embedding the local context-specific water policy frame in water planning practice	- Building partnerships and communicating with stakeholders at different levels: international, national and local levels - Stimulating frontline practices and local implementation

The first activity is presenting and communicating the developed global water solutions on global policy platforms (McCann & Ward, 2012; Minkman & van Buuren, 2019). Prince (2010) asserts that there is an increasing influence of global networks of policy experts on cross-border policy-making. In these networks, the created water policy frame should be accepted and adopted as an international policy model and positioned in various global policy platforms (McCann & Ward, 2012), such as the EU, which facilitates the production of knowledge and relation-building between policy actors in the formulation of e.g. EU's Urban Waste Water Directive (Beveridge & Guy, 2009). The second activity is engaging and communicating bilaterally with selected partner countries about the developed water policy frame. This activity highlights the communication and interaction between policy actors to promote the local use of the presented international water policy solutions (Paulsson, 2018; Stone, 2004).

2.3 Creating a local context-specific water policy frame

The third dimension in water policy translation is the creation of a local context-specific water policy frame. The interpretation of the international water policy frame for creating location-specific water policy solutions is a value-laden process (Freeman, 2009; Paulsson, 2018; Stone, 2012). As Prince (2010) argued, it is seldom possible to 'carbon copy' international policies from one country to another. Rather, they need to be adapted to the local context. Similar to the key activities related to the creation of an international water policy frame, the first activity here involves defining local context-specific water policy problems. This sense-making is shaped by local interests and institutional and cultural contexts (Stone, 2017). Based on these local problem perceptions, the second activity is developing local context-specific water policy solutions. For this purpose, policy actors selectively adapt insights and concepts from the international water policy solutions to fit the specific local context (De Jong & Edelenbos, 2007; Stone, 2012; Wolman & Page, 2002).

2.4 Embedding the local context-specific water policy frame in water planning practice

Stone (2012) defines the embedding of the local context-specific policy frame in water planning practice as 'indigenization', in which international policies are adopted in a local context through communication and collaboration between international policy actors and local stakeholders. Again, two key activities can be distinguished. The first activity is building partnerships with various stakeholders in the local context. Power relations play a crucial role in this process, for instance, international policy intermediaries, such as multilateral and financial institutions, may attempt to negotiate and influence the embeddedness of the developed local solutions through political means and conditional aids (Lendvai & Stubbs, 2009). An example of such influencing is the role of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in supporting the privatization of the water sector in some Asian countries (Molle & Hoanh, 2011). The second key activity is stimulating frontline practices (Stone, 2012). Frontline practices are essential for developing a common understanding of the meaning of the local context-specific water policy frame by demonstrating how solutions that are part of this frame could be implemented and thus locally embedded (Clarke, 2005; Meijerink & Huitema, 2010; Stone, 2012). The concrete frontline practices could be in the form of local pilot projects, local programs and exemplary local solutions.

3. Research methodology

To analyse the development of the Mekong Delta Plan 2013, our data collection focused both on the Netherlands and Vietnam. For the Netherlands, qualitative data was collected to study the creation of an international water policy frame by Dutch policy makers and the mobilization of this frame for international use. Key policy documents from the Dutch government and documents and reports produced by the Netherlands Water Partnership (a network of Dutch water sector organizations with international aims) were reviewed (see Table 2). Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven government officials and five consultants and experts who in the past and/or at the time of the interviews were involved in the internationalization of Dutch water management policy. Some interviewees were part of the MDP working team (see also Table 2).

Table 2. Data collection for studying the creation and mobilization of the international water policy frame by the *Netherlands*.

Documents	Interviews	
Title	Organizations	Interview n.
1. Strategic Watercards: International Opportunities for the Dutch Water Sector (2002)	1. Rijkswaterstaat, Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management	1
2. The Delta Approach: Introducing 12 building blocks (2014)		2
3. Dutch Surge Support (DSS Water): a rapid response to water-related disasters (2015)	2. Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management	1
4. Dutch Risk Reduction Team: reducing the risk of water-related disasters (2011)	3. Interdepartmental Water Cluster – Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy	1
5. Dutch Water Sector 2014-2015: Smart Water Solution for Urban Delta (2014)		1
6. Water innovation in the Netherlands: A brief overview (2014)	4. Netherlands Water Partnership	1
7. The Delta Program 2008	5. Deltares (the Netherlands)	1
8. A World to Gain, A New Agenda for Aid, Trade and Investment (2013)	6. Dutch Water Authorities	
9. Converging Streams – An International Water Ambition, Dutch Framework Cooperation (2016)	7. Delft-IHE (the Netherlands)	
10. The Mekong Delta Plan 2013		

For Vietnam, we first reviewed the Mekong Delta Plan 2013 to understand the Dutch-Vietnamese collaboration on water management, and to analyse the framing of the plan. We then collected and reviewed follow-up policy documents from the MDP, including Vietnamese government policy documents and a World Bank report (2016) (see Table 3). Finally, a total of 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted, with one government official, one journalist and eight consultants and experts from the Netherlands and Vietnam who were involved in the development of the MDP and other related water management policies and projects in Vietnam (see also Table 3). The data collection focused on understanding how the involved Vietnamese and Dutch policy makers and stakeholders perceived the travel of the Dutch water policy ideas. This research is based on insider's views guided by a qualitative research approach. To complement our data collection, we also used recent publications about water policy translation from the Netherlands to Vietnam.

All interviews were fully transcribed and documents and transcripts were analysed using Atlas.ti (version 8.0) qualitative data analysis software. Our analytical strategies combined deductive coding, inductive coding and the development of code networks for the reconstruction and visualization of the created water policy frame. We first developed deductive coding schemes in Atlas.ti based on our conceptual framework (Table

Table 3. Data collection for studying the creation and embeddedness of the Dutch water policy frame in *Vietnam*.

Documents	Interviews	
Title	Organizations	Interview n.
1. The Mekong Delta Plan 2013	1. Royal Haskoning DHV (Offices in the Netherlands and Vietnam)	3
2. Mekong Delta Integrated Climate Resilience and Sustainable Livelihood Project (2016)		1
3. Project Appraisal Document for Mekong Delta Integrated Climate Resilience and Sustainable Livelihood Project (2016)	2. Independent Dutch journalist	2
4. Resolution 120 on Sustainable and Climate-Resilient Development of the Mekong Delta Vietnam (2017)	3. Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management	1
		1
	4. Delft University of Technology (the Netherlands)	1
		1
	5. Wageningen University and Research (the Netherlands)	1
		1
	6. Agriterra (the Netherlands)	3
	7. Climatesense.eu (international)	
	8. Dutch Embassy Hanoi	
	9. Vietnam Environment, Engineering and Construction JSC	
	10. Can Tho University (Vietnam)	

1) to analyse the four interrelated dimensions of water policy translation. We then created inductive codes from specific language and sentence constructions used in the policy documents and by interviewees to reconstruct the framing process in both countries – dimensions 1 and 3 of water policy translation (see Table 1) (cf. Van den Brink, 2009). Examples of these 'language codes' are concepts and metaphors like: 'delta technology', 'delta governance', 'high-tech agriculture' and 'golden triangle'. These codes were thus derived verbatim from the specific content of the policy documents and interview transcripts. Subsequently, we visualized the relationships between these language codes to show the connections between the concepts and metaphors used, and in this way reconstructed the resulting water policy frames (cf. Van den Brink, 2009). For example, when reconstructing the framing process by the Netherlands, the 'integrated water safety' and 'collaborative governance' codes are part of 'delta governance', which again is part of the overall developed 'global water solutions' (see Appendix 2 for an overview of these code networks or water policy frames).

4 The Netherlands: internationalizing Dutch water management

4.1 The creation of the Dutch delta management frame for global water challenges

From the perspective of a low-lying country located in a delta, the notion of 'delta' is unique for the identification of water problems and the development of solutions for these problems. The Netherlands frames rising sea levels, land-subsidence and urban growing pressures in delta regions as urgent global water policy problems. According to Dutch water experts and officials, global climate challenges and vulnerabilities of deltas could be seen as opportunities for the Netherlands to share and communicate their 'delta management' experience and expertise. As a Senior Advisor for Water Policy and Water Governance at the IHE Delft Institute for Water Education stated: 'I think especially after the 1953 flood in the south-western part of the country where some 2000 people died, after which we built the Delta Works, we since then really say yes, our problem is water. We have a lot of experience in managing this issue.' The Delta Works consists of large-scale flood protection infrastructures such as storm gates, dikes and dams. Extensive water management experience and the success of the Dutch Delta Works has kindled global attention for and interest in Dutch water management. The Netherlands has therefore strategically framed 'Dutch delta management' as 'global water solutions' – i.e. a broad and diverse set of potential water policy solutions, not only focusing on technical expertise but also on governance approaches (especially the concept of collaboration) for addressing water problems and climate challenges in other delta countries (see also Minkman & van Buuren, 2019; Weger, 2019).

The framing of Dutch delta management as 'global water solutions' consists of three major aspects (or language codes): 'delta technology', 'delta governance' and 'Adaptive Delta Management' (NWP, 2014a; NWP, 2014b; The Delta Commission, 2008; Van Alphen, 2015; Zevenbergen et al., 2018). First, *delta technology*, primarily used to mean delta protection (flood safety), water treatment and water resources for agriculture, has become a key export product of the Dutch water sector (NWP, 2014b). As the Program Manager of the Interdepartmental Water Cluster, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management stated: 'Using water knowledge is effective in the branding of the Netherlands.' Second, also *delta governance*, meaning collaborative governance and integrated thinking, has been highlighted by the Netherlands as an important international solution for coping with the vulnerabilities and challenges of deltas. Delta governance, which is part of the Dutch Delta Programme, consists of multilevel governance, legal enforcement and financial resources for flood protection while adapting to long-term climate and water-related risks (Delta Commission, 2008; NWP, 2014b; Van Alphen, 2015; Zevenbergen et al., 2018). Third, *Adaptive Delta Management* (ADM) is the specific delta management approach that highlights scenario planning to support the assessment of environmental and socioeconomic scenarios of deltas. ADM introduces 'adaptation pathways' and 'tipping points' to support decision-making for the implementation of various adaptive measures (Gersonius et al., 2016; Haasnoot et al., 2013; Restemeyer et al., 2017). In the creation of the Dutch 'delta management frame', which is visualized in Figure 1, the Netherlands thus focuses on presenting 'global water solutions' for 'delta management', which entail a combination of 'delta technology', 'delta governance' and 'Adaptive Delta Management'.

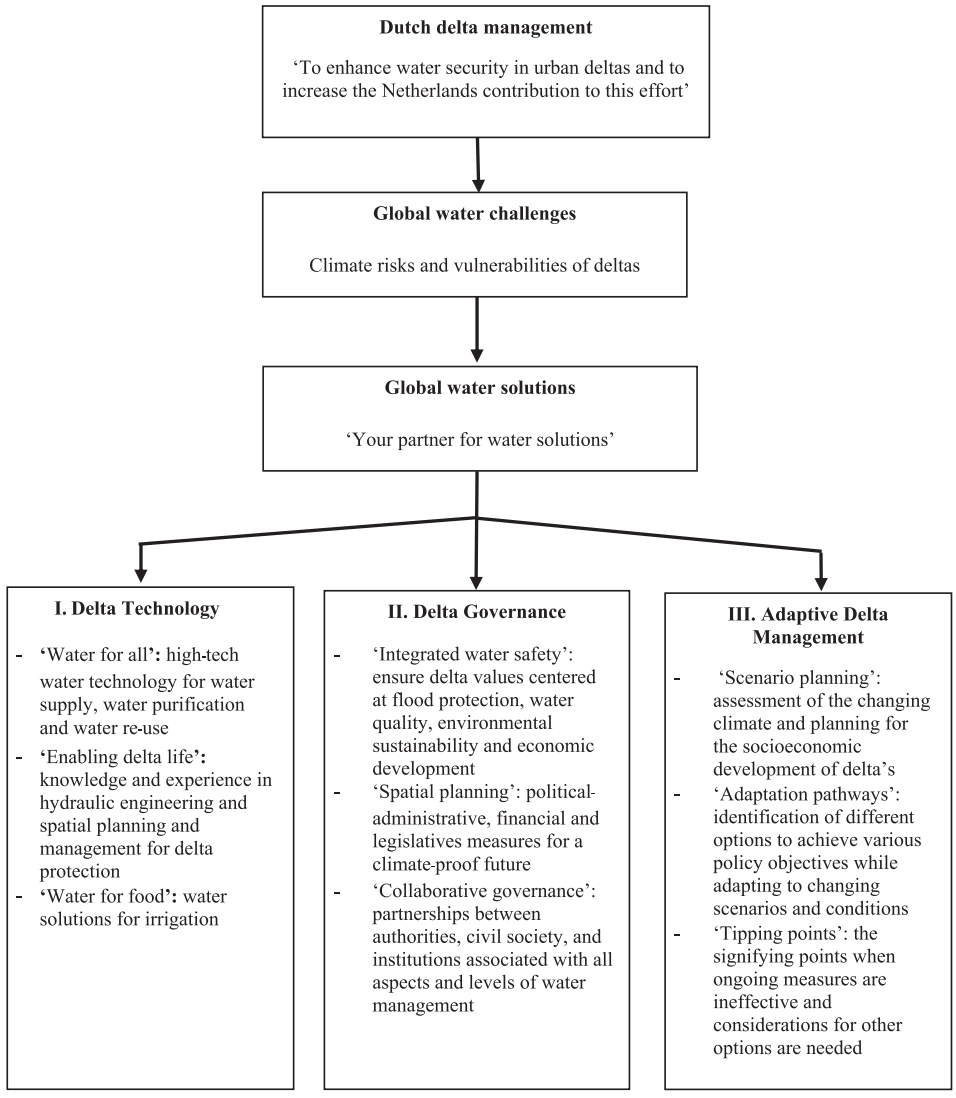

Figure 1. The Dutch delta management frame.

4.2 The mobilization of the Dutch delta management frame through delta diplomacy

The Netherlands mobilizes its global water solutions through so-called 'delta diplomacy'. This term was mentioned during an interview with the Delta Coordinator at the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, who explained the Dutch international cooperation on water. From the study 'Strategic Watercards' (Muizer & van den Bergh, 2002) about the international competitiveness of the Dutch Water Sector, the Netherlands realized that the country wanted to increase its international market share in the water sector through strengthening international cooperation. Consequently, the Netherlands stimulates global policy platforms and international cooperation to present the Dutch delta management frame in global agendas (see also Minkman & van Buuren, 2019). During the 2015 World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Sendai, Japan, the Netherlands led the establishment of the Global Delta Coalition as international government cooperation for resilient and sustainable deltas worldwide (MIE, 2016). The appointment of a Special Envoy for International Water Affairs is also part of this delta diplomacy (MIE, 2016). The government policy report entitled 'International

Water Ambitions' describes these international efforts as made to 'enhance water security in urban deltas and to increase the Netherlands' contribution to this effort (2016-2021)' (MIE, 2016, p. 9).

The Netherlands' bilateral engagement on water and climate with partner delta countries is another important aspect of its delta diplomacy. A Policy Advisor of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management explained the importance of working with international partners such as Vietnam, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Indonesia for embedding the Dutch water policy solutions in local water planning practice as follows: 'It [international collaboration] is to develop practical knowledge on the ground with the public involvement of stakeholders to see how you can make things better in particular [water management] projects.' The Dutch Water Sector, led by the Netherlands Water Partnership, launched a brochure introducing the 12 building blocks of the 'Dutch Delta Approach' illustrating significant elements and processes for sustainable delta management, based on examples and insights from the Netherlands (NWP, 2014b; Minkman & van Buuren, 2019). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also presented a communication factsheet, 'Your partner for water solutions' (see Figure 2), highlighting the roles of technical and expert teams, diplomatic missions and government representatives from ministries and embassies in internationalizing the Dutch delta management frame (MFA, 2013; MIE, 2016).

5. Vietnam: striving for a safe, prosperous and sustainable Mekong delta

5.1 The creation of the Mekong delta management frame

The cooperation between the Netherlands and Vietnam led to the development of the Mekong Delta Plan 2013 (MDP) as strategic advice for long-term planning solutions to water and climate challenges in the Mekong delta. The MDP was developed based on the Dutch Delta Programme (Government of the Netherlands and Government of Vietnam, 2013). The aim of the Dutch Delta Programme 2008, entitled *Working Together with Water*, is to climate-proof the Netherlands while it remains an attractive place to live and work. Although the development of the MDP by Dutch experts and Vietnamese policy makers was based on the Dutch Delta Programme, the plan's content was adjusted according to the water problems specific to the Mekong delta (Government of the Netherlands and Government of Vietnam, 2013). As the Team Leader of the MDP Working Team explained: '[The Mekong Delta Plan] is very different from the Dutch Delta Plan [The Delta Programme] because it fits the purpose of the Mekong delta, and because there are no good reasons to export the Dutch delta approach to Vietnam. No, Vietnam has its own problems and its own challenges and its own advantages.' While the problems as defined within the Dutch delta management frame focus on water

Figure 2. Communication factsheet of the Netherlands framed as 'your partner for water solutions'. Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015.

and climate issues, the Vietnamese water problems focus on the climate challenges for agricultural production and economic development (see also Hasan et al., 2019). As a result, the MDP stresses the impacts of the limited availability of fresh water, land subsidence and salt-water intrusion on *agriculture* as problems central to the policy (Government of the Netherlands and Government of Vietnam, 2013).

In order to deal with the environmental and climatic impacts on agriculture, the MDP recommends the agro-business industrialization scenario (agro-industry scenario) as the strategic recommendation narrating the socio-economic development and management of the Mekong delta (Government of the Netherlands and Government of Vietnam, 2013). The resulting Mekong delta management frame is visualized in Figure 3 (consisting of several key language codes), and under the umbrella of agro-business industrialization scenario presents four key components for a safe, prosperous and sustainable Mekong delta. First, the 'high-tech agricultural development model' includes recommendations to invest in specialized aquaculture and a more sustainable use of water resources, to adapt to salinization and limited freshwater

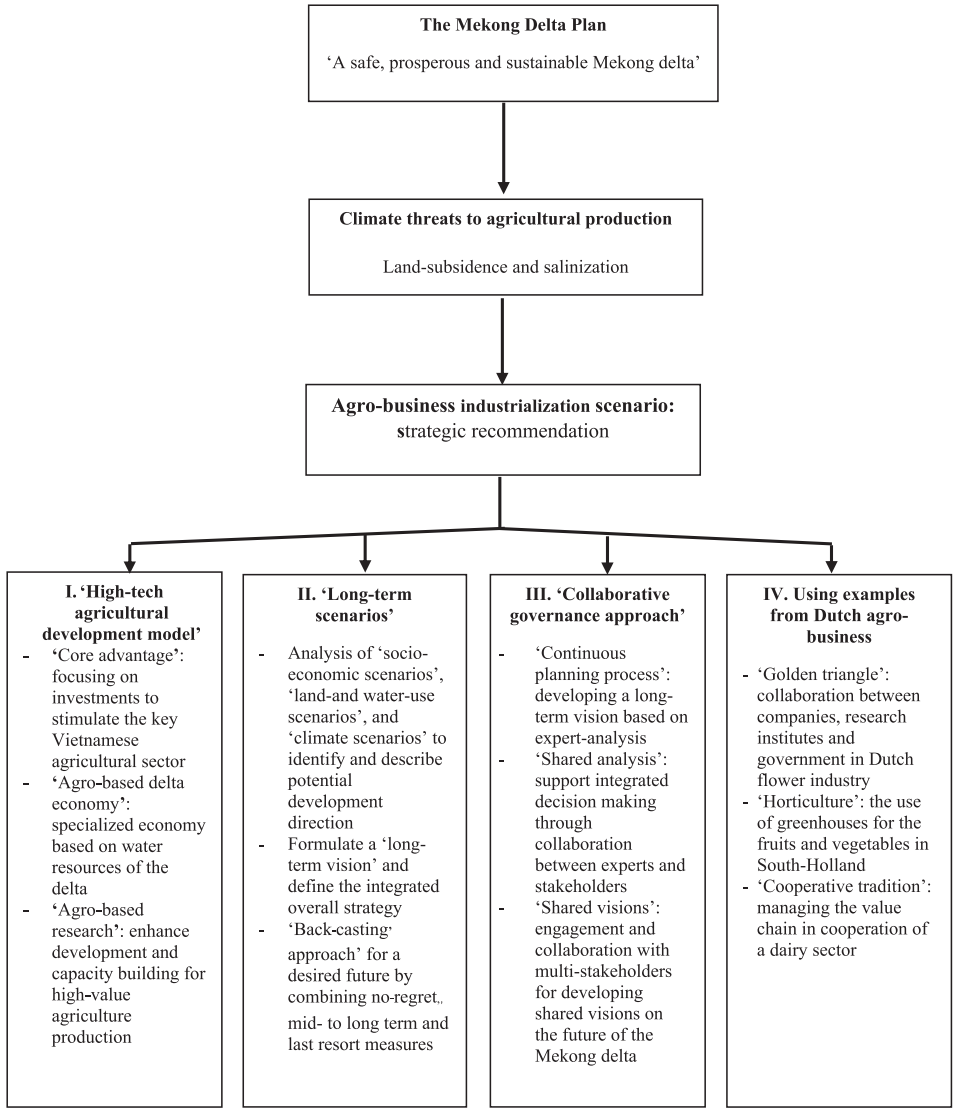

Figure 3. The Mekong delta management frame.

resources (see also Seijger et al., 2019; van Staveren et al., 2018; Vo et al., 2019; Weger, 2019). Second, 'long-term scenarios' are related to scenario planning, and are aimed at analysing and describing various potential scenarios for identifying and formulating preferred measures and strategies to achieve the desired vision for the delta. Third, the MDP stresses the need for a 'collaborative governance approach' that is translated into strengthening intergovernmental coordination and collaboration with various stakeholders to achieve shared visions of a sustainable Mekong delta. Fourth and last, the plan discusses the Dutch agro-business model as exemplary for the development of climate-proof and high-value agriculture. This example highlights the combination of a collaborative approach and advanced agricultural technology. Although the insights of the Dutch delta management frame significantly influenced the development of the Mekong Delta Management frame, its strategic recommendation was based on a different problem analysis and framing.

5.2 Embedding the Mekong delta management frame in local water planning practice

The Netherlands cooperated with international development partners, such as the World Bank, ADB and UNDP, and donor agencies, including GIZ, JICA, AusAid and USAID, to stimulate the implementation of the strategic recommendation as formulated in the MDP (see also Hasan et al., 2019; Vo et al., 2019; Weger, 2019). As the Water Secretary at the Dutch Embassy in Hanoi explained: 'This [communication process] was partly through our delta diplomacy. We engaged other (international) development partners around the idea of this delta approach.' The Vietnamese Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development introduced the Mekong Delta Integrated Climate Resilience and Sustainable Livelihood Project (ICRSL) to propose financial loans for 376 million USD from the World Bank (MARD, 2017). In its assessment of the measures that are part of this project, the World Bank also referred to the MDP's strategic recommendation and the cooperation with Dutch experts (World Bank, 2016). In 2017, the Vietnamese government issued Resolution 120 on the Sustainable and Climate-Resilient Development of the Mekong Delta based on its interpretation and adoption of insights from the Mekong delta management frame. In this interpretation, the resolution emphasizes the coordination between ministries and government agencies and interprovincial collaboration for implementing the MDP recommendations. Furthermore, it mentions that the strategic partnership with the Netherlands and other international organizations is recognized as a shared framework for financial assistance and scientific and technical cooperation (Government of Vietnam, 2017). This cooperation framework has led to the establishment of the Mekong Delta Forum – a policy platform created to develop and implement sustainable delta management programs for the Mekong delta (Korbee et al., 2019; Vo et al., 2019; World Bank, 2015).

Embedding the Mekong delta management frame in local water planning practice has been a long and challenging process (see also Korbee et al., 2019; Seijger et al., 2019). The Dutch international development policy in developing countries focuses more on capacity building and knowledge cooperation (promoting the use of their solutions) rather than direct financial aid (Hasan et al., 2019; MFA, 2013). Therefore, frontline practices, such as the implementation of local pilot projects, were not planned in the MDP, as was expected by the Vietnamese policy makers and stakeholders. From 2013, these unfulfilled expectations regarding the inclusion of a pilot program caused a delay of several years until the plan was institutionalized in Resolution 120 and was accepted as a framework for development and cooperation by the World Bank. A journalist who was involved in the Mekong delta consultancy projects pointed out the missing engagement with the local NGOs regarding the formulation and implementation of the MDP: 'I would very much involve the local community. I would say there is no NGO involved for example … I would make a plan like that [like MDP] to involve more NGOs, and more toward the people.' Although the insights and recommendations from the MDP were formalized and adopted in Resolution 120, the Vietnamese water policy experts perceived the local adoption of the Mekong delta management frame, focusing on a transition in agricultural production, as a difficult process (see also Vo et al., 2019). The Director of Water Resources of Can Tho University explained that the difficulties in implementing the agro-industry scenario are in practice situated at the local level: 'Basically, this approach [agro-industry scenario] is good in a scientific way, but it is difficult to demonstrate practical implementation at the local level especially

with regard to influencing the Vietnamese culture, people and livelihoods. It will be a challenge for the government because when it [the MDP] reaches the local scale, it will be very difficult to change people's current practices and livelihoods.'

6. Discussion

This paper aimed to contribute to the emerging field of policy translation by adopting a framing perspective for exploring the meaning-making involved in the cross-border travel of water policies. Policy framing, in particular, provided a useful analytical approach to unpack and illustrate the complex meaning-making of water policy solutions as they are made to travel, and the way in which the globally renowned water solutions from the Netherlands are interpreted and used in local water planning practice. On the one hand, our reconstruction of the Mekong delta management frame showed that the Dutch delta management frame was interpreted and adapted to local realities. The key narrative shifted from a focus on an integrated perspective on water safety and environmental sustainability, to an emphasis on agricultural and economic development – presenting the agro-business industrialization scenario as the recommended solution (see also Hasan et al., 2019; Vo et al., 2019; Weger, 2019). On the other hand, our reconstruction of the Mekong delta management frame illustrated that the framing of the MDP was very similar to the original Dutch delta management frame. Key concepts and metaphors, such as 'collaborative governance' and 'scenario planning', were central in both frames. Critical points of attention, however, emerge when studying the local reception of the above concepts, that is, how these concepts are interpreted and used in Vietnamese water planning practice.

First, one of the key concepts of the Dutch as well as the Mekong delta management frame is 'collaborative governance'. While 'collaboration' in the Dutch delta management frame refers to interactions with a broad range of stakeholders including civil society, the Mekong delta management frame highlights, in particular, the collaboration required between different ministries, across governance levels, and with international partners. The 'collaborative governance' as translated in the MDP does not seem to extend to local communities or other stakeholders who are potentially relevant to the plan. The Mekong delta management frame was mainly created by Dutch policy officials and consultants, together with a group of Vietnamese retired civil servants and academics – described by Hasan et al. (2019) as 'retired reformists'. The translation and embedding of the strategic recommendation of the MDP in local water planning practice were influenced predominantly by the World Bank and other international organizations. Other research also pointed at the efforts to set-up a coalition between the Dutch water policy experts and international organizations for promoting the local implementation of the MDP (Hasan et al., 2019 & Vo et al., 2019; Weger, 2019). Vulnerable local communities were not included in the creation of the local context-specific water policy frame. The framing analysis thus showed that the inclusive dimension, which is implicit in the 'collaborative governance' concept in the Dutch delta management frame, was interpreted differently in the Vietnamese context.

A second critical point of attention concerns the concept of 'scenario planning', also central in both the Dutch and the Mekong delta management frame. In the Dutch delta management frame, 'scenario planning' is part of 'Adaptive Delta Management', emphasizing the identification of tipping points and adaptation pathways. In the Mekong delta management frame, the focus is only on 'scenario planning', which was interpreted as a rather linear approach. Based on an analysis of 'long-term scenarios', the emphasis was on identifying and formulating 'preferred solutions'. The adaptive dimension, that is, giving attention to developing a more diverse set of policy solutions while adapting to changing scenarios, was not included. This finding is in line with the results from research by Weger (2019), stating that the Vietnamese policy makers are more interested in selecting 'preferred' solutions for guiding actionable policy, rather than seeking an 'open-ended approach' to planning and decision-making. Scenario planning was considered to be the backbone in the formulation of the MDP and attracted the attention of Vietnamese policy makers and international organizations. In practice, however, this concept was used, for example in Resolution 120 and ICRSL, as a tool for forecasting future scenarios and for identifying and thereby justifying already existing and preferred projects and solutions, which are not necessarily flexible and adaptive to the changing conditions of the Mekong delta.

A third and final point of attention concerns the 'agro-industry' concept, which is one of the key concepts and the strategic recommendation of the Mekong delta management frame. It recommends a transition toward a saline-based agriculture development model. However, the local use of this concept turned out to be quite challenging, as it did not resonate with existing local water planning practice. Our empirical results showed that the lack of local willingness and acceptance of this recommendation impeded embedding and translating it to practice. Similar to the 'collaborative governance' concept, the development and interpretation of the 'agro-industry' concept were not carried out together with local stakeholders. In addition, there was a lack of local pilot projects to illustrate the potential practical implementation of this concept. The findings of this research therefore suggest that translating potential promising water management solutions to local water planning practice requires a continuous learning process and inclusive communication and meaning-making with different local stakeholders on the ground. Accordingly, based on our findings, we recommend future research to look into the reception, translation and impact of the developed Mekong delta management frame specifically on local agriculture and economy.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to connect a framing perspective to policy translation to analyse language use and meaning-making in complex, dynamic and political policy translation processes. Our analysis showed that the Mekong delta management frame was developed and strategically promoted by Dutch water experts and policy officials, contributing to a lack of local ownership among the Vietnamese stakeholders and challenges regarding indigenization (Stone, 2004) of the MDP.

Based on this analysis, an important lesson can be drawn for improving cross-border policy-making for sustainable delta management, namely that inclusive engagement in *the meaning-making process* is crucial to create and stimulate a shared understanding and ownership of new policy ideas. This lesson is closely connected to the relevance of *continuous learning*. Engagement of, and communication with, local stakeholders over a longer period of time is a prerequisite for implementing the translated concepts in practice and thus ultimately for contributing to sustainable delta management. Other research also suggests that continuous cooperation on knowledge exchange and capacity building would support the practical implementation of Dutch delta management abroad (see also Korbee et al., 2019; Seijger et al., 2019; Vo et al., 2019; Zegwaard et al., 2019). In addition, in the translation process more attention could be paid to encouraging the understanding of the origin of policy concepts and ideas, especially when concepts are being adopted in significantly different contexts. This is important to avoid potential intended 'misuse' of concepts.

To conclude, the use of the framing perspective as an analytical approach helped us to illuminate the political and dynamic process involved in the construction and negotiation of meaning in the cross-border travel of water policies. While this research focused specifically on discussing the translation of global water management solutions to local water planning practice, zooming in on one particular policy frame in Vietnam, based on our findings, a recommendation for future research is to explore in more detail how the Dutch water management solutions are translated into the local Vietnamese political economy, especially the agriculture economy. In addition, more research in general is needed to analyse how the translation of water policy frames influences day-to-day policy making, and what the actual impacts of globally renowned 'water solutions' are on e.g. the local agriculture economy 'on the ground'. Finally, combining a framing perspective on water policy translation with a comparative analysis could also enrich insights on how countries can better share policy ideas and learn from each other in order to address complex water and climate challenges, especially in vulnerable delta countries.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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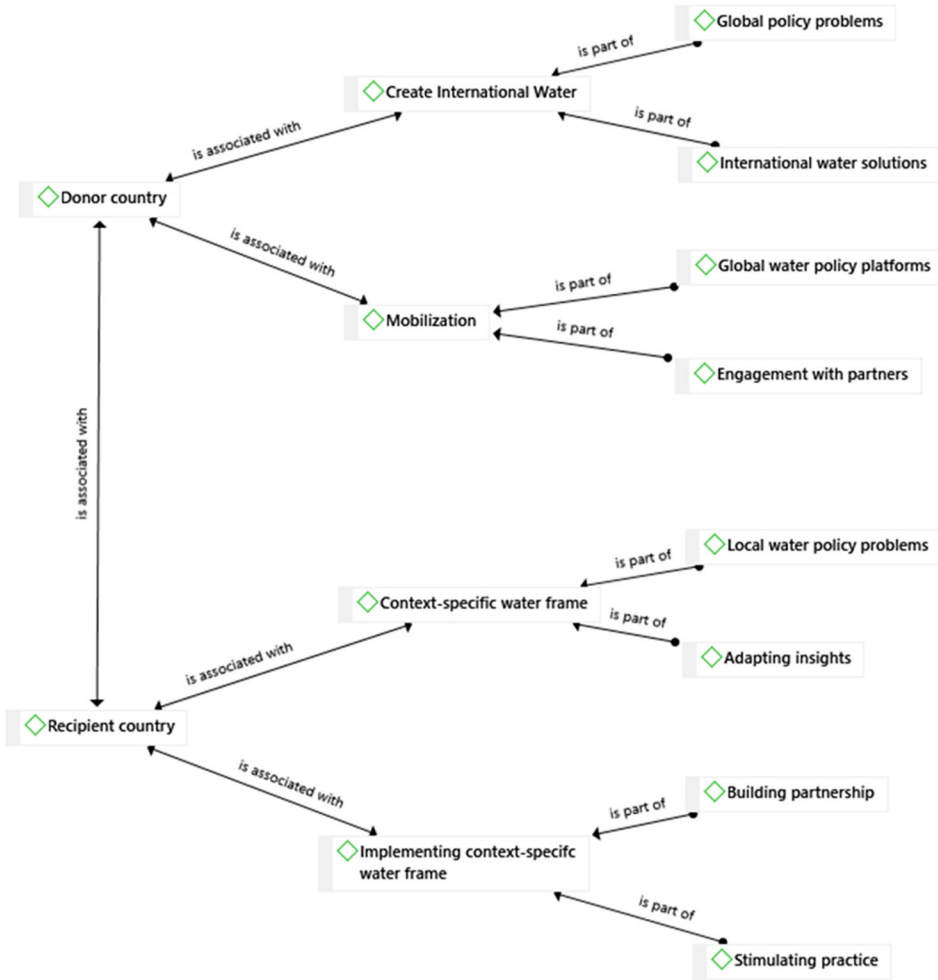
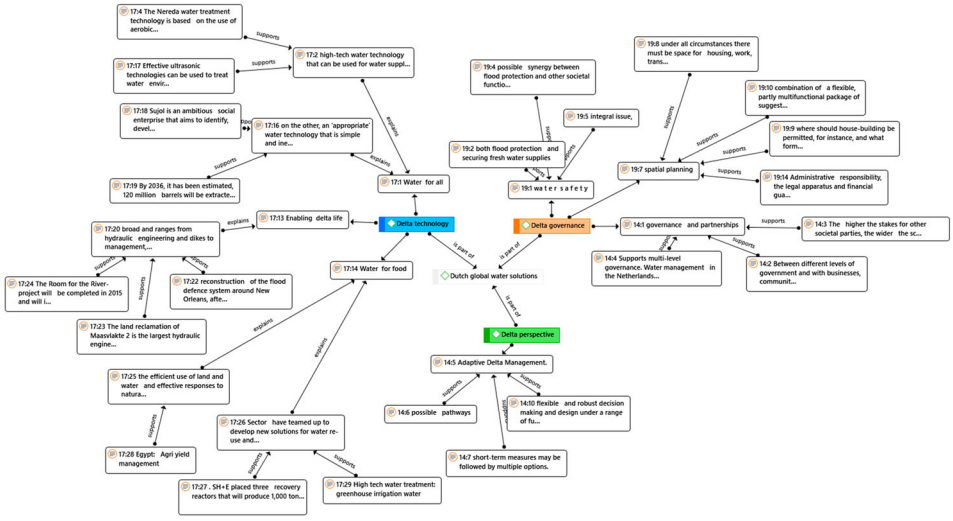
Appendix

Appendix 1. Water policy translation Atlasti code networks



Appendix 2 Atlas.ti relational networks of the water policy frames

2.1 Dutch delta management frame



2.2 Mekong delta management frame